

Friends and family help candidate for heart transplant 'attend' her high school graduation

A high-tech commencement

*By Nathalie Dortonne
Correspondent*

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Photo courtesy of the Haberman family

Heart-transplant candidate Taylor Haberman, right, receives a hug from Streetlight member Stephanie Chery during her graduation ceremony, which was streamed live.

Taylor Haberman wears her heart on her sleeve.

For the past six months, the 18-year-old has been awaiting a heart transplant at the University of Florida Health Shands Children's Hospital.

So as the date of her high school graduation approached, a quandary developed.

Taylor is on an exception to be on Status 1A, which means she has top priority status for a donor heart.

"(If you're) waiting at a 1B status as an adult, you could wait a year," said Adam Haberman, Taylor's father. "She would have moved down on the list if she went to her graduation."

That's when Streetlight, a support program at UF Health for young adults living with life-limiting illnesses, stepped in.

Through a five-camera stream, Taylor was able to participate in Bartram Trail High School's commencement ceremony, which was held at the University of North Florida arena on June 1.

She used Facetime on an iPad, carried by her 14-year-old sister, Kailey, who was standing in for Taylor, to virtually walk with her senior class and accept her diploma.

Several thousand people rose to their feet in the arena, which was filled with thousands of red, pink and silver hearts in a show of solidarity, and gave Taylor a thunderous applause.

"If they had a gown on the stage, [it] had a heart on it," Adam Haberman said.

Streetlight director Rebecca Brown said she wanted to make Taylor's graduation special.

"She wanted to sit in that room to see the whole graduation live — not recorded several hours later," Brown said.

Taylor was born with congenital heart disease, which is a common birth defect that disrupts the normal flow of blood to the heart. Taylor has an extremely rare form of congenital heart disease.

"All that pretty much means is that my red and blue blood mixes," Taylor said. "My heart's backwards, and I have two chambers instead of four."

Her father said Taylor was born blue because oxygen was not circulating like it was supposed to in her body. Her first surgery was 18 hours after birth.

Inside Taylor's hospital room, a white erase board displays a Bible verse from Ezekiel 36:26: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Underneath the verse is the number 154, a reference to the number of days Haberman has been in the hospital.

About 50 family, friends and Streetlight members celebrated Taylor's graduation in a UF Health conference room as it was happening.

Moe's on Southwest Archer Road catered the graduation party with tacos, burritos, chips and salsa. And the graduation cake was donated by Publix on Archer Road, where Taylor worked before she went on medical leave.

While her favorite color is pink, Taylor said she wanted the room decorated with her school colors of blue, silver and black.

Taylor's curly red hair donned a dark blue graduation hat with a pink heart painted on top.

Her family's support helps Taylor keep a positive outlook on life, said Samyr Elbadri, a Streetlight volunteer.

The first-year medical student said Taylor's family and Streetlight do not let her feel sorry for herself.

"With a support system like that, it's really hard to have bad days," he said. "She [always] sees the glass half full."

Taylor said she plans to go back home to Jacksonville, attend a community college and transfer to UF to study nursing.

She said she wants to become a nurse because she wants to help children who are in her situation.

"If this [had] never happened to me, I wouldn't have ever met these people," Taylor said. "Streetlight [is] the reason why I'm still positive every day."

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HABERMAN FAMILY

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TAYLOR: Classmates had hearts on their gowns

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